

Theology (Old Testament)

The beginnings of OT theology are usually traced back to J. P. Gabler's inaugural lecture 'On the proper distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology' at the University of Altdorf in 1787 (ET *SJT* 33, 1980). The two centuries which have since passed have seen the publishing of many volumes in which OT theology at least formed a part, beginning with that of G. L. Bauer (1796, ET 1838); countless other works have also considered aspects of the significance of the OT within Christianity, which has been a subject of Christian thinking from its beginnings (see H. Graf Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology* and *Problems of Biblical Theology*, ET 1985, 1986; J. H. Hayes and F. D. Prussner, *Old Testament Theology*, 1985). Yet these two hundred years have seen no progress towards agreement regarding the aim and method of OT theology.

The fundamental reason for this lies in an inherent tension between the concept 'theology' and the entity Christians know as 'the Old Testament'. Theology is a reflective, analytic, abstract discipline which seeks to formulate a carefully conceptualized account of ultimate truths regarding God and his relationship with the world in the light of the ways of thought which characterize the academic thinking of the day. 'The Old Testament', however, is a collection of pre-Christian stories, laws, prayers and praises, proverbs, poems, oracles, and visions, the work of many groups and individuals over many centuries, addressing many contexts and pursuing many aims. It is more symbolic than conceptual, intuitive than reflective, concrete than abstract, holistic than analytic, instinctive than disciplined, contextual than timelessly universal, concerned with obedience, worship, and faithfulness rather than ideas in themselves.

Inferring that justice cannot be done simultaneously to the nature of the OT and to the concerns of theology, a number of scholars have separated the two ventures. Thus H. Schultz, author of one of the first independent OT theologies (i.e. ones which did not lead into a NT theology) (1869, ET 1892), in later editions of his work devoted one volume to the development of theological and ethical ideas in Israel against the background of Israelite history and religion and a second to the ideas of the OT examined systematically. During the nineteenth century, scholarship focused increasingly on the former set of questions and the latter concerns came to be neglected until the beginning of the Barthian era and the revival of theological interest in the OT in Germany after the 1914-18 war. Then in a famous article in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (44, 1926) O. Eissfeldt specifically argued for the separation of historical-critical study of Israel's religion with its objective, historical approach from the writing of OT theology with its requirement of the commitment of faith. The two-part approach was taken up again by E. Sellin (1933) and O. Procksch (a work completed during the 1939-45 war but published only in 1950).

Generally, however, OT theologians have resisted such a bifurcation of interests and have sought to combine them by 'bending' the OT to make it more theological and/or 'bending' the concept of theology to assimilate it more to the nature of the OT.

Both aspects of this bending are already apparent in Gabler. He advocated a

biblical theology which began by being historical and descriptive rather than timeless and prescriptive, yet which then went on to eliminate ideas limited by time and place. His aim was to systematize the normative, unchanging truth of the Bible so as to be able to hand this over to the dogmatists to express it in terms appropriate to the day. Inevitably the decisions involved in this process would reflect contemporary philosophies such as romanticism, rationalism, Hegelianism and idealism, as well as the consistent concerns of the OT itself. Even when fulfilling its descriptive task, OT theology was unconsciously shaped by categories from elsewhere.

A different form of the bending of the OT to theology is the traditional structuring of OT theology by means of categories from Christian systematic theology such as God, man, salvation, and eschatology, by writers such as Bauer, Sellin, and L. Kohler (1936; ET 1957). Recent writers have generally structured their work by means of categories which they see as more reflective of the OT's own underlying concerns. Most famously, W. Eichrodt (1933-39; ET 1961-67) took the motif of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel as the broad framework for his presentation, though (like Bauer) he combined that with a historical approach to many themes treated within this framework. T. C. Vriezen made the communion between Yahweh and Israel the framework for the revised edition of his work (1966; ET 1970). Many other writers have begun from some aspect of the person or activity of God himself or from some aspect of his relationship with humanity such as his presence (S. Terrien, 1978) or his promise (W. C. Kaiser, 1978). Others have been content to examine what they see as key OT themes, without claiming that these comprise a system (e.g. J. L. McKenzie, 1974).

Eichrodt described his method as a cross-section approach, while J. Bright (*The Authority of the Old Testament*, 1967) called it an attempt to identify the OT's underlying concerns: the latter expression makes particularly clear that part of the bending involved in such treatments is that they are not handling the text itself but something they believe lies beneath it.

Writers such as Eichrodt declare that they aim both to do justice to the OT's own concerns and to demonstrate their points of connection with the NT. In practice their works, like the OT theologies that more explicitly follow categories adopted from Christian theology, can be seen with hindsight to assimilate the OT to Christian theological concerns in their value judgments and in the way they understand the OT's priorities. Litmus tests for this process are the way OT theologians handle the themes of the land and the cult, two prominent theological themes within the OT. The former is ignored by most OT theologies (even recently by B. S. Childs, 1985). The latter is not ignored but treated with a negative slant which derives from Protestant theological convictions rather than from the OT (see e.g. Köhler). But some more recent works have made some progress in their treatment of such OT themes (e.g. W. Zimmerli, 1972, ET 1978; C. Westermann, 1978, ET 1982; E. A. Martens, 1981).

Eichrodt's programmatic statements, paralleled in Procksch and Vriezen and given more emphasis by G. A. F. Knight (1959), might make one expect more by way of explicit Christian bending of the OT than in fact appears in their work. It is actually no more marked than that in many writers who do not acknowledge such an aim. Indeed, such bending is generally less evident in actual OT theologies than it is in

some other works concerned with the theological significance of the OT for Christians, which rework a number of traditional ways of establishing connections between the OT and the NT (see A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament*, ET 1978; J. Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, 1981). Thus (among writers accessible in English) W. Vischer uses typology to establish links between OT characters and Christ as he expounds *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ* (1934-42, ET of Vol. 1, 1949); cf. K. Barth's theological use of the OT (e.g. the treatment of Job in *Church Dogmatics* IV 3 i, 1961). W. Zimmerli in *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation/Hermeneutics* (ed. C. Westermann, 1963) sees the OT as embodying a hope and promise that are fulfilled in the Christian gospel. Bright pictures the OT as Act I to the NT's Act II in the story of salvation. R. Bultmann (see discussion in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* ed. B. W. Anderson, 1964) emphasizes the disjunction between OT and NT by means of the Lutheran antithesis between law (the OT) and gospel (the NT). In itself the very title 'the Old Testament' of course already expresses a theological judgment which does not emerge from the OT - nor for that matter directly from the NT.

As we have noted, the converse bending of theology to do justice to the nature of the OT appears in the nineteenth-century stress on a historical approach to the OT. The early decades of this century saw continuing development of the study of ancient Israel against the background of religions and ways of thought characteristic of contemporary or parallel societies. An implication of such study is that Israel's religious ideas or theology can hardly be appreciated apart from their context in Israel's religious and social life, though in the process of the bending of the OT to the nature of theology (and given German scholarship's generally negative stance in relation to 'religion') this implication has often not been perceived (see R. E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology*, 1978).

After the approaches with less emphasis on history which characterized the period between the wars, G. von Rad (1957-60, ET 1962-65) reasserted the significance of history and powerfully advocated its specifically theological significance. In contrast to the cross-section approaches von Rad also encouraged a further bending of theology in order to do justice to the OT through his stress on the diversity of the OT expressions of faith rather than the oneness of an alleged underlying theology. That has been a key awareness of scholarship over recent decades (see P. D. Hanson, *The Diversity of Scripture*, 1982).

Discussion of von Rad's work stressed the difficulty of his theological stress on history, given his minimal evaluation of the actual historical value of the material from Israel's early period with its theologically foundational importance. Arguably the real subject of von Rad's theological work was the development of Israel's traditions, not Israel's actual history. This tradition history became the explicit object of the OT theological enterprise in the work of H. Gese, though his stress on the significance of the last form of the tradition which subsumes all the others undermines the significance of earlier parts of the OT (see e.g. *Essays on Biblical Theology*, 1981; and more generally *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. D. A. Knight, 1977). The bending of theology to the actual form of the OT is taken further in the concern with the theological significance of the final, canonical form of the OT text which appears in different ways in the work of B. S. Childs (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 1979) and J. A. Sanders

(*From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, 1987; and more generally *Canon and Authority* ed. G. W. Coats and B. O. Long, 1977).

In this context we may also note that some of the most significant OT theological work of the century has appeared in OT commentaries. Among writers in English one should mention Childs's *Exodus*, 1974, and works by W. Brueggemann on Genesis and Psalms; but a theological interest is more characteristic of German commentators such as von Rad, Westermann, Zimmerli, A. Weiser, H. W. Hertzberg, H. W. Wolff, H.-J. Kraus and H. Wildberger in the series *Das Alte Testament Deutsch* and *Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament*; translations have been published in the Old Testament Library, the Hermeneia series, and separately. In a commentary, theology has a particularly clear opportunity to follow the OT itself rather than reflecting alien concerns, though the explicit theological work in such commentaries may nevertheless assimilate the text's interests to those of Christian faith by the techniques which we have noted above.

In explicit attack on such OT interpretation which subordinates the OT to the NT, the importance of the theological message of the OT in its own right was asserted by A. A. van Ruler (*The Christian Church and the Old Testament*, 1966; see also K. H. Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent*, 1967). As we have noted, substantial specific areas of OT thinking have been missed in much OT theology. Von Rad's stress on the OT's concern with Israel's history obscured for scholarship its equally explicit concern with the world, with nature, and with human experience, though von Rad took up these themes in his *Wisdom in Israel*, 1972, virtually a third volume to his *Theology* (see further J. Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament*, 1987, ch. 7; Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology*, ch. 5). This theme features in several of the 'Overtures to Biblical Theology' series such as W. Brueggemann's *The Land* (1978) – noted above as a topic characteristically avoided by Christian OT theology.

A paradoxical aspect of the study of OT theology surfaces here. In an important article on biblical theology in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962, K. Stendahl argued, like Gabler, for a descriptive approach, a study of OT and NT in their own right independently of a desire to discover what they have to say prescriptively. There is a sense in which this bends theology to the OT, but because the nature of theology is to formulate what we may or should believe, not merely to analyze what people have believed, Stendahl advocated this approach out of a concern to do justice to the text itself and to avoid bending it to our agenda. But like Gabler he risks a hermeneutical naivety that fails to recognize how we all see only in part; we have prejudices which both facilitate and limit our seeing, even when we are overtly seeking to understand something for its own sake and not in order to get answers to our questions. All the more will this be the case with OT theology (as history since Gabler shows), which though formally descriptive is ultimately designed to point to what should be believed, and which often has a specific hidden agenda of which even its author may be hardly aware. So the descriptive approach may miss theological aspects of the OT such as its this-worldly and human concerns, which an overt concern with the present-day message of the OT brings into clearer focus. Liberation and feminist approaches to the OT illustrate this point. Another way of perceiving more of the theological potential of the OT lies in studying the work of writers of different backgrounds and faith

commitments. For Christians, this will mean especially Jewish writers (see e.g. J. D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 1985).

While it is disappointing that two centuries of study have not yielded an agreed methodology for OT theology, it is gratifying that the period has yielded a rich corpus of illuminating works which often complement each other by bringing out various aspects of the diverse richness of the OT itself as well as by being critically corrective of each other.